

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #449-1

with

Helen S. M. Kam Lau (HL)

June 9, 1993

‘Aiea, O`ahu

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mrs. Helen Lau on June 9, 1993, at her home in ‘Aiea, O`ahu. The interviewer is Warren Nishimoto.

Okay, Mrs. Lau, let's start. Why don't we start by having you tell me first when and where you were born?

HL: Well, I was born in Pearl City, [O`ahu]. And then from there we moved to Waiawa.

WN: What's the date of your birth?

HL: My birth. January 2, 1916.

WN: Okay. And then you were first in Pearl City?

HL: Yeah, Pearl City [*until 1923*]. Then we went down to [*Pearl City*] Peninsula. And then we stayed there [*less than one year*]. And by the time we moved to Waiawa [*in 1924*], I think I was about [*eight*] years old or something like that. And then we stayed there until [*1937*] until I got married.

WN: So in Pearl City, what did your parents do there?

HL: They had the rice field.

WN: And so they farmed rice. What else did they do?

HL: That's about all down there. Well, as usual he [*Helen Lau's father, Mook Yong Kam*] always have his garden, for vegetables and everything like that.

WN: Do you remember being in Pearl City?

HL: Yeah, uh huh.

WN: Oh, you do?

HL: I do, uh huh. So, I know when the rice season, we always have to chase the birds [*away*] and yell until we got hoarse (laughs). This is funny though. It's a nice place, but we didn't have much neighbors over there.

WN: Where exactly was the rice farm?

HL: Right in Pearl City town they had that store over there, Mow Leong Store. And then there's a park in the back of that and right alongside there is our home. And then that goes down to the waterfront, ocean. And these other families have piggeries down there. So we lived above them.

WN: So you lived by Mow Leong Store?

HL: Yeah.

WN: So, like today, what's over there now?

HL: Nothing, all down. Mow Leong Store facing up [i.e., *mauka*] and then get post office facing them right there, in between is the train tracks. There's nothing there now. All the stores gone and everything.

WN: So you folks were *makai* of the train tracks?

HL: Yeah, uh huh.

WN: So you said one of your jobs was to chase away the birds?

HL: Yeah (laughs). My brother and I (laughs). He's above me, eh. So we have to chase the birds. That's about all we do over there. And there's a river that we used to spend time, you know, playing in that river over there. It's all cold water. I think spring water over there. At that time, I think, I was the youngest. The fourth one anyway [HL is the fourth of ten children]. We had the three older ones and myself over there. So we all helped chase the birds.

WN: You mean you just ran around and yelled or . . .

HL: Yeah, when the birds come we yell and (chuckles) whatever. Whatever noisemakers there, we just pull the strings and, you know, frighten them away. It's fun, but hard work. We hardly have any neighbors there, that's one thing. No [other] children or anything. But we didn't stay very long. Then we went down the peninsula.

WN: Pearl City Peninsula, yeah?

HL: Yeah.

WN: And what do you remember about Pearl City Peninsula?

HL: Well, over there my dad has the duck farm and I think he has a fish pond there.

WN: The duck pond and fish pond were separate?

HL: Yeah, the duck doesn't go in the fish pond. They have a house for the ducks, shelter, and a little muddy pond there. That's about all he did down there. And I think that's why we didn't stay very long [*less than one year*].

WN: What kind of fish were in the fish pond?

HL: There was goldfish, I think. I don't know, something like that. Not mullet. I know it's goldfish. The black with the brown and the red one or something like that. I don't know what he does with that. But I don't see him market that thing. But he used to market the ducks and the chicken, that's about all. The eggs, eh. So I don't---we didn't stay very long there, I know.

WN: So then, you don't remember too much about the peninsula?

HL: No, but . . .

WN: Did you have neighbors over there?

HL: Yeah, in the back of us there's a Komatsu family. I think quite a few of them still living yet, because I seen Mrs. Komatsu. Not the elderly, but our generation one, she's around. I mingled with those children. But [the elder] Mrs. Komatsu doesn't speak any English so she always talk Japanese to me. And I have to ask the kids, what she's saying and everything. So that's how I learn a little bit Japanese. And I haven't forgotten, because when I'm with the seniors over here [*at Lanakila Nutrition Program*], some of them just speak Japanese too and I kind of understand them. And most of them, majority, speak Japanese to me. And they think I'm Japanese, you know. Later on, they find out I'm not Japanese, but still they cannot speak English fluently. So in between they put few Japanese words in there. So that's how I learn a little of the Japanese. So everybody says, "Oh, we cannot talk about you then." (Laughs) That's funny.

WN: Were there Chinese at the peninsula?

HL: There's no Chinese at all. Only this Japanese family there. But further over has a Korean family, but we hardly see them. They little bit farther. I don't know what they do over there. So that's about all I remember down there. Not too much.

WN: Could your father and mother speak English?

HL: My mother [*Ah Soong Char Kam*] speak *da kine* rough English, you know. Not polished. And then she understand us if we speak English. But my father doesn't speak English. He speak Chinese to us. So, that's how I learn the Chinese. He speaks Chinese.

WN: Cantonese?

HL: My mother and dad speak Cantonese, too, to the other Cantonese, but they're different dialect. They're Hakka. So they speak Hakka to us and then when friends come, Cantonese friends, he speak Cantonese.

WN: I see. So the friends that came that spoke Cantonese, they didn't live on the peninsula?

HL: No, no, they don't. Oh yeah, another thing. While we living down peninsula, the olden days they have these *kiawe* trees, lot of *kiawe* trees down there. And these people go around and buy the beans from the *kiawe* trees to feed the horses. So we used to go down and pick all the beans and put it in the burlap bag. And the whole bagful sells for only fifteen cents, you know (laughs). But you know, since we have nothing to do and we have to make little bit money, those days, hard, yeah. So my mother goes down because she had nothing to do on the farm. And we used to follow her, my sister and I. And other people, you know, the Japanese neighbors, we all go together. We pick the beans and we sell those beans.

WN: Who bought the beans?

HL: I don't know what kind people, but they have some horses or something for plow and all that kind. They buy the beans. It's a funny thing, and now you hardly see those beans, you know. And then they had the clams on the other side of the ocean, Pearl Harbor side. We used to pick clams and somebody used to come and buy it, too. I don't know who they are, but anyway, we used to go dig the clams and things like that. So that's how we make a little bit money.

WN: So on the Pearl Harbor [*i.e., east*] side of the peninsula?

HL: Yeah, uh huh. That was open. Clams and crabs and things like that. So it was kind of hard down there, I guess. My mother used to take us along so we could just follow her. It's funny, now you don't see such things. (Laughs)

WN: So you picked the *kiawe* beans off the ground, put it in burlap bags. How heavy was a bag?

HL: It's not very heavy, the beans is kind of light. My sister and I can carry the bag so I guess it's not too heavy.

WN: And what about the clams? Where did you put the clams?

HL: In the bucket. And they come and weigh it and then they pay us for it. But I don't remember who buys it. That's the only two things that we did down there.

WN: So your father had a duck pond, fish pond. Did he have vegetables or anything like that?

HL: Not down there. No. Only duck and chicken, that's all. So he raise the duck and chicken. He sell the duck eggs and the ducks. That's about all. I don't believe I seen any vegetable garden down there. I think that soil wasn't---sort of salt-water-like, I remember.

WN: Did you have chores at the peninsula?

HL: No, (laughs) only what we did. Go pick beans is enough. It's tiring, you know, go over there pick all the beans and all. And pick the clams. We used to have clam stew, but [*with*] the smaller ones. We'd sell the big ones (chuckles). And then my dad used to go and work outside in the rice fields for people. 'Cause when they harvest the rice, you know, they all cut it all. He goes and works for them so they pay him. Yeah, we didn't have much to do down there.

WN: So, when you were at Pearl City Peninsula, you went to school?

HL: No, I didn't go until [*the family moved to*] Waiawa [*in 1924*].

WN: Oh, yeah?

HL: Because I used to wonder, how come I'm so late, you know, I graduate [*from high school in*] '35. Most people graduate early than I. So I asked my mother and she said because I was so small and skinny and nobody could take me to school, walk me to the train track. That's far, you know. Those days we used to go to school barefooted, you know. No slippers, no shoes or anything. Everybody go barefooted. The train tracks had a lot of rocks, too, see, so she said she was afraid that those older kids won't wait for me or anything like that because my brothers, they go with their boys. So she didn't let me go to school until I was seven. But my birthday was January, so by September I going be eight by that time come, yeah.

WN: Right. Yeah.

HL: So that's why I figured, how come I graduate so late? And so she told me. There's no mandatory age at that time. You just go at any age.

WN: So when you were eight years old you moved to Waiawa, and then from then you started school?

HL: Yeah, from there, about that.

WN: So you were always older than the other kids?

HL: Yeah, the other graduates.

WN: How did you feel about that?

HL: I didn't feel anything because they looked bigger than me. Most of them are bigger than I am, you know. And I'm small, so. Those days are funny, you know, the school. They have a [*Territorial*] Board of Health nurse come

around and they pick us. They find out that we way underweight. They give us cod liver oil (chuckles). Oh, every morning, they give us cod liver oil and milk. I just loathed that thing (laughs). So I never think about that I was older than them or what because majority are bigger than I am and everything, so. But only when I grew up I was wondering, how come, you know? I notice the rest are younger. But there were some about my age, too.

WN: So you went to Pearl City School?

HL: Uh hmm [*yes*], Pearl City School.

WN: Where was that?

HL: Up the highway, Kam[*ehameha*] Highway. Way up the highway. So we had to walk through the track and then go up towards [*the present*] Pearl City [*Shopping Center*]. You know where Longs [*Drugs*] is now?

WN: Yeah.

HL: Around there, the school. [*Pearl City School was located on Fourth Street, where the Pearl City District Courthouse stands today.*] So that's how far we had to walk, so. . . . And then after that I went to Kalakaua. We had to go to intermediate school. There's no other intermediate school on this end. So we had to catch the train and go to Kalakaua [*Intermediate School*]. We finish eighth grade. And from there we go to McKinley [*High School*]. That's the only high school, too, they didn't have any `Aiea High [*School*] or Waipahu [*High School*] or anything that time.

WN: Okay, so tell me about Waiawa, when you folks moved from the peninsula to Waiawa.

HL: Okay, when we moved down there [*in 1924*], my dad has the lotus farm and he raised pigs and he has ducks and chicken and he has his own garden. So he sells the lotus. He worked hard, he and my mom. And dig those lotus, and that goes out to the wholesalers and all that. And we have this *ung choy*, I don't know what you call it in American. They usually market that, too. And then the vegetable is for home use because I never seen him buy any vegetables. He grows his own. Everything is grown at home, yeah. But we have variety, too. I know he used to go to market every Saturday on the train and he comes home with the beef and pork and things like that, and those Chinese things, *lup chong*, and all that kind. But no vegetables so like. . . .

WN: Which market did he go to?

HL: Downtown, C. Q. Yee Hop and all those places he buy the things. And we have our own poultry, ducks and chickens and eggs and everything. And whenever company comes by, my mother just catch one chicken or one duck (laughs). She slaughter that and she clean it and she cook it and they stay for dinner.

WN: So of the things that your father grew and raised, what did he actually market?

HL: He market the lotus, the *ung choy*, and there's some water chestnut, and some taro, I think. That's about all.

WN: So he sold all that to the market Downtown?

HL: No, no. This man comes, the middleman, he comes and picks it up. Because those days nobody drives, no more cars and everything like that. So this guy comes around, I think he goes to all the neighborhood over there, watercress and all he picks it up and he take it to the market and he makes his commission.

WN: Now, this middleman, was he Chinese?

HL: No, Masutani. Japanese. He lives Waiau, the other side of Pearl City. He lives over there. You know where Sumida Farm [*Inc.*], now?

WN: Yeah, that watercress farm?

HL: Watercress. Yeah. Somewheres below there, you know. And he used to come and pick up all these things and he takes it in the morning. In the evening he picks it up and then. . . .

WN: And he came on a car or truck?

HL: Truck. He has a truck. His son is still living, he was in the same senior citizen [group] with me at `Aiea, but I quit the senior citizen. I'm now on the nutrition side. So, he's still there.

WN: Masutani?

HL: Yeah, Masutani. That's a old family there.

WN: So your father's farm in Waiawa is near [*where*] Leeward Community College [*is*] now?

HL: Yeah, in the back, below that.

WN: *Makai* of Leeward [*Community College*]?

HL: *Makai* side. Right alongside the train track. And then the ocean is below the train track. So the West Loch side, yeah.

WN: And did you have neighbors?

HL: Well, lot of neighbors, but not close [*by*]. Fields extended to certain area and then their home is further over. We have [neighbors on] the left side above us, and the right side, but not close [*by*]. On this side of us we have the Asato

family and on this right we have Oshita. O-S-H-I-T-A, Oshita. He has some lotus and Asato family has the lotus and piggery. Well, we have piggery, too, at my dad's place. That one, he sells that too, when it gets big. He buys the small one from, I don't know who, but he buys it and he raise it. And when it gets to so many pounds, then he markets that.

WN: He marketed the pigs, too? Did Mr. Masutani pick that up, too?

HL: No, no. People comes and look at it. And then when they see it they buy it. So not Masutani, he doesn't do that. He just take only the vegetable side.

WN: Your father had pigs, too?

HL: Yeah, uh huh.

WN: So he marketed pigs? What about the chickens and the ducks?

HL: The chickens and the ducks, no. Just for the eggs and our use.

WN: For your use?

HL: That's about all.

WN: You also said that there was *yama imo*?

HL: Yeah, but we don't have too much of that. We don't market that. I think that is once a year, I think. New Year time they can pick that.

WN: So, you know, a lot of these crops like lotus, water chestnut, taro, they're all wetland [*crops*]?

HL: All mud, yeah. Everything the mud.

WN: Was there a river nearby?

HL: Yeah, we have a big river [*Waiawa Stream*]. Well, the plantation [*O`ahu Sugar Co.*] has a pumping station kind of far, not far, but away from us. And there's a big river over there that goes down, the water goes down into the ocean. And then somehow I think, maybe the water comes in this other way, too. I don't know how it goes, anyway. But there's a lot of wetland over there. So we used to swim (chuckles) in that river. And there's those little shrimps . . .

WN: `Opae.

HL: `Opae, `o`opu. We used to catch those things in between the rocks. You know, when they have the grass grow alongside, catch it over there. And then we swim in there . . .

WN: Was it deep? The river was deep?

HL: Well, one section where the pumping station is, yeah. And then when we have to go across to another family's house like that, they have a big, long bridge over there. And that place is big. It's deep, real deep. From the bridge, we usually dive down to that area. But after that it sort of tapered down. It's not very deep. But deep enough to the knee, I think. But the other section was real deep and plenty rocks. That's why we used to talk about it later. You know, sometimes old friends come over, we used to talk, "Chee, it's a wonder we don't get killed."

I said, "You know, there's so many rocks in that thing and we just dive down not thinking, eh." You know, when you're young you just dive in there and play. So it was fun, though. We get together. Get quite a---plenty families, you know, but you have to walk quite a distance to their house. From our house you can see their homes, but you cannot reach them unless you start walking and get there.

WN: Were there any Chinese neighbors?

HL: Yeah. See, after that Asato family, across the pumping station over there, there's a Chinese family. And their field is right next to theirs [Asato's], like that, you know. And then, from there you cross the bridge, the river, there's another Chinese family there. I don't know what they raised over there. I don't think it's any lotus, but I think *ung choy* and watercress. And above them is that Nakatani family. And alongside Nakatani family, quite a ways, there's another Chinese family. So quite a---yeah, plenty Chinese, Japanese over there. And then when you go down a little ways, that's the Ho family. He has all the watercress. He and Nakatani and all them have all the watercress over there. They have the spring water over there. In our section we don't have the spring water, [we had] all that mud water.

WN: Was it brackish?

HL: No, it doesn't smell at all, but all the mud. That's all I see (chuckles), mud and water. And we have a little pond, too. After they dig that lotus out, you have to bring it back and dump 'em in the pond and then we had to wash all the mud off. You know, in between the links, yeah, we had to wash it all off. Make it nice and clean and that's a lot of work, you know. We just had to bend over and wash it and really hard work. Every day we had to do that. After school, Saturday. The only day is Sunday we don't. . . . No, no, Saturday we don't work because he doesn't deliver on Saturday. We have to start back on Sunday because he comes and picks it up Monday morning.

WN: So you were out there in the fields, too?

HL: Yeah, in the afternoon after they dig that [lotus], they go in the morning and dig it up. And they come in by lunch, my mom and dad, and then after that they bring everything, dump 'em in the pond and then my father used to take a nap (laughs). And we have to wash that and then we had to take it back under our basement there. And he had to weigh all that.

WN: This is the what, the lotus?

HL: Lotus. He had to weigh all the lotus in and make into a ten-pound bundle or twenty-pound bundle. So he weigh all that and then we know how many pounds and everything. And then Masutani take it and I guess he take one bundle to one market and the other bundle to another market. So that's how they work it, I think.

WN: So, lotus is the root, yeah?

HL: Yeah. I know a lot of people don't know what is lotus now, you know, these kids. Even the other night I was talking to my grandsons. He just graduate from UH [*University of Hawai'i*] and he took us to dinner before graduation. So we were talking about it and then I says, "Do you know what is lotus?"

"What?" Both of them, you know. One of them was away at college. He said, "What is that?"

I said---we tried to explain to them what it is, you know. They can't imagine what it is. "You ever eat that thing that has lot of holes?"

(Laughter)

HL: They look at us, then they said, "Oh, it's sliced and then get holes. Yeah, maybe we did I think." He said, "In the food, yeah." Sometimes when they make the Japanese *nishime* they put that in or something. So they said, "Yeah, maybe we did." They're Japanese-Chinese, eh.

So I said, "Your mom never tell you about *hasu*?"

"No."

(Laughter)

HL: We talk and laugh and everything. And their grandma, too, the Japanese one, was with me. So she knows too, and we eating our dinner and we talking about it. So we had a good laugh. Ho, these kids didn't know anything.

WN: How did Chinese eat *hasu* [*lotus*]?

HL: They make it in soup. Some people buy pig's feet, and they boil it and they put the *hasu* in that soup. Or some people buy soup bone, beef, boil it and put in there and have the *hasu*. We used to eat it raw, you know, when we washing that thing. See, that *hasu* is the first part of that *hasu*, that's the old part and they go down gradually, yeah. And gets the younger ones, yeah. And the young ones come out real white, you know. So funny. And the other one is sort of brownish. Sometimes that thing is fragile, so sometimes my parents, maybe, when they bringing it in, like that, it brokes off. And so we pick it, we wash it clean and we just eat it like that. Sweet, you know.

WN: My mother makes it with vinegar. With vinegar and sesame seeds.

HL: Yeah, they can do that. You can pan-fry it, too, you know. Chinese they can pan-fry it with some pork or something like that. They do that. But now [*lotus is*] so expensive, I don't think they buy that thing. Yeah, two-dollar-something a pound.

WN: Yeah. But that's still locally grown, eh?

HL: I don't know.

WN: Don't they still have some *hasu* growing?

HL: Unless the only place could be up Hale`iwa I think, they might have some. Because I seen in the market, too. So could be over there. All along Waiawa, I don't think they have anything already. It's all fill up, eh. Everything is fill--- they said they filling up that place. I don't know what they going do, because that's Bishop Estate[-owned land], you know. So what they going do with that?

WN: So your father's main crop was lotus?

HL: Yeah. Lotus.

WN: And what were your chores? Did you have any?

HL: My chores?

WN: Yeah.

HL: Well, I have to look after the younger ones. And whenever I go anywhere to my friend's place, I have to take him [*brother*] along. That's why he's close to me now. I used to take care of him. And there are times when I don't come back early enough. Then when my mother comes back from the field I get good scolding for not bringing him back to feed him (laughs). I used to tell him that. I have to take him along wherever I go. And then in the afternoon I have to wash that lotus, and things like that. And when my mother give birth, no doctors, you know. The ten of us, my father helps her and everything turns out okay. So usually the first few days she cannot do anything heavy or go out in the wet. So I have to go wash the clothes, and we don't have a washing machine, we got a washboard. And those days all [*cloth*] diapers, no more Pampers or whatever. So I had to wash all that and everything.

WN: You had running water there?

HL: No, we have a well. They have water there, but we cannot drink that water, it's not spring water. So the drinking water, my mother has to go way up to the pumping station up there. And she kept two big kerosene can like. And then she carries it on her shoulder and bring it home for us and we drink it.

WN: Oh, on stick?

HL: Yeah, drinking water. I don't see how she can carry that, so heavy. But we have the well there and then that water we can use it for bath and anything. But it's not spring water, so I don't know [*where*] the water comes [*from*]. So we don't dare drink that water.

WN: Was it clear?

HL: Yeah, it's clear. The one in the pond is sort of brownish. I mean, I don't know where that water come from, too. So I had to do things for her and things like that.

WN: What did the well look like?

HL: They have a boxed in, you know, something like that square thing. And boxed and I don't know how deep. Must be about five or six feet deep or something like that. And I don't know how the water comes out, though.

WN: Was there a bucket or something?

HL: No. We take with the bucket and the water still stay up the [*same*] level, see. So I don't know.

WN: Oh, you mean it wasn't five or six feet deep?

HL: No, no, it's up. . . .

WN: Ground level?

HL: Yeah, ground level. But the box is real deep down. They built a box or something. I don't know who did that, but anyway it's way down and the water is deep. But we don't have to---it's not like in the pictures that it's way down. So we use that water for washing and bath and things like that. But you don't drink that.

WN: Where did you take a bath?

HL: We have a bathroom there, but no bathtub. We have to take a bucket of water (laughs).

WN: Ooh, cold, eh?

HL: No, we had an outside wood stove where we take the big, what do you call that thing, the container. You ever see *da kine* tub?

WN: That metal tub?

HL: Yeah, get the two handle and the round one. Well, we put a couple of buckets

of water in there and then we get wood stove and boil the water and we take it in the bathroom and then, you know, put cold water and mix it up. But there's no bathtub, but we have a stool that we can sit on (laughs).

WN: Oh, boy.

HL: Real funny.

WN: You did that every night?

HL: Every night, yeah (laughs). We get the wood stove there and we boil the water and one by one we take a bath.

WN: So there were ten of you?

HL: Ten. Well, not all ten stays home [*at the same time*]. I think by the time I grew up, about ten or eleven years old, my sister went out to work already, the oldest sister, for a *Haole* family. And my brother, older one, I think my father sent him to China once and he stayed for two years or so. And so he wasn't home. Only the one above me is home and myself and maybe a couple of younger ones. That's about all. Then later on my mother had more. Then we had about six or seven of us there [*at one time*].

WN: And out of the ten, what number were you?

HL: Number four.

(Telephone rings. Taping stops.)

WN: Okay. So we were talking about your brothers and sisters. So out of the ten what number were you? You were number four.

HL: Four. But later on I wasn't home either. When I was about thirteen, fourteen years old, I think, I went to work, summertime. I went with my sister. She was married by then. She was about, what, four or five years older than I am. So anyway, she got married and then she said she was going to the [*pineapple*] cannery, so I said, "Oh, I want to go too." You know, make some money.

She said, "They won't take you. You too young, fourteen years old." Not quite fourteen yet.

I says, "Well, I can try." I went with her. I stayed with her. She has a home up Liliha. So I went with her and stayed with her and we went down to the cannery. So we got in. I bluffed my age, fifteen (laughs). They don't need any identification. Oh, but it was hard work, I tell you.

WN: What did you do?

HL: They usually take the new people, they give you trimming. And so, to trim a

pineapple, you know, you have to stick your thumb [*into the cored fruit*] like that, and then roll the pineapple and trim it. Ho, after that day, the thing so sore, you know.

WN: Acid, eh?

HL: No, not the acid. Trimming so many pineapple with one hand and everything and with the same thumb. I says, "Chee, I don't know if I last." But I kept on going and got better so I finished the summer. So that's how I got my money to go to school (chuckles). I worked right through the summers for four years, I think, over there, the cannery. But after that they gave me packing, that was easier. But the first year, man!

WN: Trimming is a hard job to start with.

HL: They give the new people that trimming job. It's fun though, that thing [*pineapple*] comes down that conveyor. And then you get about five of us line up. Each one had to pick up the pineapple that comes down to you. If you don't pick it up and do it they shove it back to you (laughs). So you had to keep up to trim it. So after that it come routine so it's okay. But only thing, it's real tiring, it's hard job. And so during the summer that time, I wasn't home. I stayed with my sister, she has a two-bedroom apartment. So she and I goes and work over there.

WN: You know, you said that your mother went to the water pump to get drinking water. How far was that?

HL: Real far. For the distance that she walk and carry that heavy thing is far. I couldn't say how far, maybe about. . . . Takes her about ten minutes I think, or five minutes. No, couldn't be five minutes. Maybe ten minutes to go and come back. It's way up side by the watercress fields. They have a big, I don't know, dam or something over there. All the clear water over there. Everybody around there get that water to drink. So she goes up there and get it. It's not a well, it's an open thing, you know. But all the clear water in there. And it's cold water. She goes every day to get the water. And that's for our drinking water and our cooking water, things like that.

WN: And what did you folks used to cook with? The wood stove?

HL: Yeah, all wood. It's in the kitchen and they have that kind of iron rods and they put the pots and pans on top there.

WN: So you didn't have kerosene at all?

HL: No, no kerosene yet.

WN: What kinds of foods did you folks cook mostly?

HL: All Chinese food. So she cooks the vegetable, pan-fried or whatever. All kind Chinese food. So we have lot of vegetables over there, that's one thing. And

well, they survived for how many years until 1948.

WN: So what about like holidays? Like what about Christmastime? Did you folks do anything special?

HL: We don't have any [*Christmas*] trees (chuckles). We don't have anything. They real Chinese. My father from China, and my mother doesn't know much from here, too, because she hadn't had much education, I think. Only one or two years school, that's all she had. I think where my grandma used to live [*in China*], there's no school, it's so far or something. And then later on when she [*mother*] was much older, then she went to school. I think she said one or two years, something like that. Enough to speak little bit, that's all. But she doesn't know how to write. I don't know what kind school she went, but anyway, she said she went just short time. She cooks all---she's a good cook. She cooks everything. And especially they big on Chinese New Year. When Chinese New Year comes they buy all the sweets and my mother makes all, Chinese they call *gao*.

WN: *Gao*, yeah.

HL: She makes it ahead of time. But they don't have *mochi* flour at all in the stores, you know. So she have to buy the *mochi* rice. She soaks it and next day, in the cement bucket, she pound it in there with some kind of iron thing. She does that every year and she makes the *gao*. New Year's Day she makes the *jin doi*, the brown one they sell now.

WN: *Jin doi*?

HL: Yeah. The round one with the brown, kind of brownish, with sesame seed on. That thing she makes every year and then if anybody come she serve them that.

WN: Moon cake, too?

HL: No. Moon cake is another festival [*Moon Festival*]. It's in September. My father buys the moon cake and he prays to the moon and everything and then we can have that.

WN: That's in the full moon?

HL: Yeah, offering. And then that time he has moon cake, watermelon, and oh, snails from the pond and all that kind. And we used to eat that.

WN: How did you prepare it?

HL: They cook it [*snails*] with garlic and what you call that, that seed. I don't know, Chinese has a [*black bean*] seed that is preserved with salt and everything. And then garlic and I think some leaf that they put in. Japanese put in *ume*, the leaf.

WN: Oh, beefsteak?

HL: Huh?

WN: Is that the beefsteak [*plant*]?

HL: No, no, the leaf. You know when they make *ume*, preserve the *ume*, they use some kind leaf in there. I don't know what they call that leaf. [Helen Lau is probably referring to the beefsteak plant, or *shiso* in Japanese.] And they use that and it's real tasty, you know, when you eat that snail. He has that, and moon cake, and then fruits. And oh, here's another thing that I hardly see now that comes from China, I think. It's black and it has a horn or something like that. And then kind of big like that. And then they boil that. And we peel it. It's hard to peel, you know. And then we eat that and it's good. I don't see that anymore.

WN: No, I've never seen it.

HL: That's strange, you know.

WN: So that's the September celebration?

HL: Yeah, September when the moon [*is full*].

WN: Chinese Moon [*Festival*].

HL: Every September is the Chinese full moon. So that's two occasion they celebrate.

WN: Did you folks celebrate regular New Year's too?

HL: Regular New Year's, no.

WN: Five days after Christmas?

HL: No, no, we don't.

WN: Just the Chinese New Year's?

HL: Yeah, just the Chinese New Year. And then, oh, they celebrate that, what do you call that now, the cemetery that . . .

WN: Ching Ming?

HL: Yeah, that one. Every year they go to my grandma and grandpa one in Pauoa. They bring all the food and everything. So that one. That's the three big occasion, I think, they do.

WN: Do people come?

HL: Come where?

WN: To your house?

HL: Yeah, after the New Year, though. Maybe the week after that, they come around. Or else we go to their place or they come to us, like that.

WN: Were your parents religious?

HL: Yeah, I think in a way because. . . . But they don't go to church, but they have that . . .

WN: Oh, the altar?

HL: The altar and they burn the incense every day. And every day and holidays they burn some kind paper, or something. They do that, I don't know. I don't know what that for anyway (laughs). But he has, just like the god or something.

WN: And what kind of stores---what stores did they go to? What stores were in the area?

HL: There's no stores at all until you reach Pearl City [*town*]. I remember couple of times they told me to stop at one market, you know, right next to Mow Leong [*Store*] there's a market there, but not exactly. They don't have much, just little bit pork, little bit beef, like that. They don't have anything frozen. They say, "Go pick a piece of beef or something and bring it home." So we had to bring it home for them to cook that day. But usually we get enough. So there's no market at all, you know, funny. I guess, lot of farms they have their own chicken and things like that.

WN: What about rice, though? Where did you get your rice?

HL: Oh, my father buys that.

WN: From where?

HL: Downtown.

WN: Oh, he goes Downtown. How did he go Downtown?

HL: He goes on the train, but I don't know how he brings that home (laughs). But he gets the rice and everything.

WN: Did he go often?

HL: Well, sometimes maybe if he has time he go. But usually, most of the time, once a week, Saturday. Well, the train, where we catch the train, is only a short distance. You can see the little house.

WN: The station, you mean?

HL: In walking distance.

WN: So your father would take the train to town, buy his supplies?

HL: Uh hmm [yes].

WN: Did anybody come to take orders or deliver groceries?

HL: No, nothing. No more such thing.

(Laughter)

HL: They used to have delivery groceries, but not in our section. You know, they don't come that far.

WN: So you walked to school until you went to Kalakaua [*Intermediate School*]?

HL: Uh hmm [yes].

WN: Then how did you get to Kalakaua?

HL: I catch the train.

WN: Oh, you caught the train?

HL: We used to buy the ticket. I think was three dollars a ticket for one month, and then come back.

WN: Try and describe the train for me. Was it open air or covered?

HL: All covered just like you see in the Mainland. Same thing like that. And then they have the rows of seats. And I think you can seat three of you if you smaller or bigger. And then you can turn the seat backwards or this way. Just flip it over. I know there's a lot of `Ewa people [*riding the train*]. It comes from that end, I think. All the `Ewa people takes the train too, and it comes through Waipahu, and then us. I think we the last, I think. Pearl City people. And then we get on the train and we jump off at Kalihi. And then we walk up to Kalakaua.

(Knocking on the door. Taping stops, then resumes.)

HL: Get the engine and then get about four or five coaches.

WN: All with passengers?

HL: Yeah. And then all the school people, we ride the train. There's no other way to go. There's no buses. Didn't have bus those days. And then hardly any automobiles. The older people, they don't drive.

WN: So went up Kam[*ehameha*] Highway and then . . .

HL: Wait. The train goes along the, let's see, below Kam Highway, on the seaward, Pearl Harbor side, and it goes through Pearl Harbor and then it goes through, what you call . . .

WN: Nimitz [*Highway*]?

HL: Yeah, Nimitz, and then that used to be Damon Tract. Right along there and continue on below, right above Sand Island by the Gaspro place in the back of there. Continue on to the depot Downtown.

WN: I see. So to go Kalakaua, you got off in Kalihi on Nimitz Highway. And then you walk?

HL: Yeah, walk up there.

WN: That's not too far, yeah?

HL: No, not too far. About two blocks I think or so. That's how we go.

(Visitor arrives. Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

HL: So, the train goes over there. And then when we go to [*McKinley*] High School, we drop off at the depot and we catch the rapid transit. And the rapid transit is open. It's not, you know, it's that and only have the . . .

WN: Oh, oh, streetcar, you mean?

HL: Yeah, yeah, streetcar. It's a streetcar like San Francisco, open like that. We just run, jump in and (claps hand).

WN: Oh, I see, you would go all the way to the `A`ala Park depot? You take the trolley to Kalakaua?

HL: No, no. Kalakaua [Intermediate School], we jump off [*in*] Kalihi. And then when we come home the train stops by Kalakaua there, too. When we all stand there, the train stops and we jump on. But when we go [*McKinley*] High School, we go as far as the depot by `A`ala Park, and then we jump on the . . .

WN: . . . trolley to go to McKinley?

HL: Trolley, uh huh [*yes*]. Well, those days the trolley was only five cents (laughs).

WN: Did you have to get off at `A`ala? Could you get off along the way any time?

HL: Yeah, yeah, you can. It's just like the bus, you pull the . . .

WN: Oh, no, but I mean the train though?

HL: Yeah, yeah.

WN: Train you can get off anytime?

HL: Yeah. Any place where they get the stops. Like if you want to jump off at Damon any place there, then you jump off. So from our place, Waiawa, if I wanted to jump off Pearl City, you can. It's fast, it's good.

WN: How long did it take you to get from Waiawa to `A`ala?

HL: To the depot or to the school, Kalakaua?

WN: To the depot.

HL: Well, maybe less than half an hour, I think, because no more traffic. And they don't make much stops, so only half an hour. It's fast.

WN: You wonder with all this talk about mass transit, you know, they could just put the tracks back on and . . .

(Laughter)

HL: They still have, you know, now, yeah. But they can just continue on with the tracks. And it holds a lot of people, you know, that thing. As long they put the coaches on. So those days we didn't think much of the train, but like now everybody talk about train, like they never ride the train or something, but for us it's just another thing. (Laughs)

WN: Now, did your brothers and sisters help a lot on the farm?

HL: No, only the brother above me, he and I wash that [*lotus*]. But my sister below me, I don't think she ever touched that thing. Because after she finished eighth grade she didn't continue school. She went with some other girls to go down and work for those people at Ford Island. She stayed there all week and maybe only Sundays she comes home. She never helps. And my older brother, he never helps, too. And my sister never helps, so only my brother and I. He's the third and I'm the fourth. And then my younger brothers, the ones I took care, grew up. And then [*World*] War [/] came on, both of them went in the service. So they hardly helped. All the younger ones didn't help so . . .

WN: Did your parents encourage you to go to school?

HL: No, my mother didn't. Nobody did. But I wanted to go, since my brother was already in McKinley, he's one or two years older than I am. Then my mother said, "No, you cannot go. We cannot support you." That's why I wanted to go get something to do. So I went cannery. So, I worked.

So I said, "Well, I think I have enough money."

So she said, "Well, okay, go. Girls don't need education." You know those days. Boys okay, they let 'em go. So my brother and I went to school together. And then my younger sister didn't want to go to school, but the rest of them went. By the time my two younger brothers was of age, they had Waipahu High School already. So they went that way. And my two younger sisters went to McKinley because they moved out there [*Manoa*] already, you know. They were of age so they moved out to the [*parents'*] Manoa home already. They lived there with my two younger brothers. They were out of the service. But my mother them just go back there for the weekends.

WN: By the time you were going to McKinley, you were still commuting from the farm?

HL: Right.

WN: What did you want to be?

HL: Well, I wanted to be an office worker or something like that. So I just took up math and typing and things like that. So that's what gets me in [*U.S.*] Navy Exchange. I worked for them.

WN: Did anyone want to take over the farm?

HL: No, nobody (laughs). Nobody want that. They [*siblings*] don't even work on the farm.

WN: Must have been---your parents must have been muddy a lot.

HL: Every day. And then they come in and then they take a bath, they clean up. Really muddy, real dirty job, you know. I don't think anybody wants that job. So I think all of those people over there, I know that's three families that has that lotus plant. And this side, Oshita, has some. So there's four families over there. And then the rest is all watercress and piggery. Piggery is the Sakai. And funny, you know, I haven't seen this Sakai family, but coincidence, when my son married his wife, the mother's sister is married to Michael Sakai. And I met him (laughs). That's how long, you know. So funny. And so, he remembers me, you know. And he says, "Yeah, you used to live down there." He lives [*Pacific*] Palisades, now. He's retired, too. Everybody retired. But that Asato family, I think they live in Pearl City Heights or something.

WN: Asato?

HL: Yeah, but I've never seen them. None of those people. But somebody in my family said they saw the daughter. But I've never seen any of them.

WN: I forgot to ask you but while you were on the farm growing up, what did you folks do to have good fun?

HL: Oh, we have our neighbors. We play and we go swimming together and things like that. And when I can get away from the boys and my mother, not in the mud, we make plans. We make rice ball and we go swimming. And we eat the rice later and all that kind. So we had fun over there. And then when we go another family [*home*], this family is in the cane fields, you know, no [*other*] home alongside that place. They isolated and only cane fields around them. And then they have a daughter and two sons. And I don't know what the father do. I think he works Downtown for some kind of store, I think. And so they have a lot of mango trees and guava trees and everything. So we always go over there, season, and we pick those things. And we play with them.

WN: Were there a lot of mangoes and guava?

HL: Uh huh [yes], over there. And plum. You ever heard of the sour plum?

WN: Yeah. I don't see that anymore.

HL: You don't see, but lot of plum trees. We used to get it and salt it. But any goodies, we don't have. No candies, no nothing. But my mother would buy, you know, I remember seventy-five cents a bag of sweet potato. She used to boil that for us. And then whenever we want we pick on it and then she buys crackers in the big box. That's the only kind goodies I remember. We don't have anything else, you know.

WN: What about lychee? Was there lychee over there?

HL: This family in the cane field had the lychee tree. And then guava and they got mango trees and sour sap.

WN: But those trees you didn't have by your house?

HL: No, we didn't have any trees at all over there.

WN: Too wet over there maybe?

HL: Yeah. The only thing I think we had was banana (laughs). Banana trees over there. Asato had lot of banana trees and papaya trees. Those were the days, boy. After that the family all got married and go off. My sister went off after she got married. In fact, she went to San Francisco and then she stayed there and she got married. The second marriage. The first one didn't work out so she went San Francisco. And she lived there I don't know how many years. Just few years ago she was about eighty-something, she died. And then they wanted to be buried back here. So they bought a place at Hawaiian Memorial [*Park*] and we buried her over there. And the husband still living in Oakland.

WN: Okay. So you went to McKinley High School and you graduated in 19 . . .

HL: Thirty-five.

WN: Thirty-five. When you graduated, what happened, what did you do?

HL: I went to work for the [U.S.] Marine [Corps] laundry over there as a clerk. And then I continue working until I got pregnant. No, not the first baby, I went back work after the first baby. The second one.

WN: So you got married in '37?

HL: Yeah.

WN: How did you meet your husband [*Ah Leong Lau*]?

HL: Oh, I met him one night at a dance (laughs). You know, those days was good, you know. It's not like today, these kids. Those days they used to have benefit dances at that `Aiea gym [*and*] `Ewa gym. They all have the music there. And Downtown they used to have all over, you know. And all teenagers, we go to these dances. So I met him at one dance at `Aiea. He's `Aiea boy, see. And when we go dancing, one of the girls drives us there. That Mow Leong Store girl, she drives because she makes deliveries, too, before. She learned to drive. And so, she picks us up and we all go together and we meet them and then we talk. So we keep on doing that. So after that, he talk about oh, `Ewa going get a dance, couple of weeks more, and he asked me if I was coming. I said, "I don't know. I'm not sure unless I get a ride." So that night I went and he was there again (chuckles). So that's how we met and every time we met at the dance. And later on, I think he drove, but he didn't own a car. The brother has a car. So he ask the brother if he can use the car one weekend. So he called me and then he asked me if I want to go out with him. So that's how we went out. And then we went together for about three years, then we got married.

WN: So you were still in high school when you met him?

HL: No, no, no, just about finished.

WN: Just about finished?

HL: Yeah, eighteen years old.

WN: I see. So by that time you were working at the [U.S.] Marine [Corps] laundry?

HL: Yeah.

WN: I see. So what did his family do?

HL: Rice field. Originally, when he [*Helen Lau's husband*] was young they had rice field. But when he was twelve years old, the father died. He was real old, much older than the mother, see. I think about fifteen years older than the mother. And he [*Helen Lau's husband*] was only twelve. He was one of the youngest [*in the family*], he and the sister. They had about ten of them, too.

And then after that, I think the father died, they didn't have the rice field, and the oldest brother grew up. And then he works Pearl Harbor [*Navy Yard*]. And then in the meantime, he buys pigs and he start the piggery farm. And all of them, the younger ones like him, had to go feed the pigs in the morning before they go to school and everything. So the brother helped support them. And then later on when he [*Helen Lau's husband*] finished, he went to the school by the [*Hawaiian Pineapple Co., later Dole Corp.*] cannery over there, what school is that?

WN: You mean elementary?

HL: No, after elementary school.

WN: Oh, high school?

HL: Not the high school, it's a . . .

WN: Trade school.

HL: Trade school, yeah.

WN: Oh. [*Today it's*] Honolulu Community College, yeah?

HL: Yeah, across the cannery used to get one [*on Dillingham Boulevard*].

WN: It's still there, but I don't know what they called it back then [*Honolulu Vocational School*].

HL: Something like that. That's what school he went. He went to take carpentry. So he finished, he went Pearl Harbor [*Navy Yard*]. But he didn't like Pearl Harbor because Pearl Harbor has lot of this asbestos, you know, from the ship and everything. So he put in application for Hickam [*Field*], as carpenter or something like that. So they called him and then he got interview and he got this job [as] housing inspector and claims adjuster. He was happy so he stayed over there for the rest of his life (laughs). Till he retired. So, you know, Hickam housing, every time somebody moves out, he gotta go inspect that and make a claim on that.

WN: And they were living out in `Aiea?

HL: Yeah, he was born in---all his life he lived in `Aiea.

WN: Okay. What I want to do is to stop here and then if I can come back one more time, we start from your [*U.S.*] Marine [*Corps*] laundry time. And we talk about the war and your new home after you got married, okay?

HL: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW